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## IN BEHALF OF STANDARDIZED READING

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In the course of my college teaching, I face twice each year a class of Freshmen who are recommencing in college the work in English literature which they have but just laid down in the high school. At the first meeting of the class, it is my custom to give out a list of book titles, asking the students to check once the books they think they have read in connection with their high-school work in English, twice the books they know they have read, and three times the books they remember well enough for discussion.

Until lately, the checked lists, so far as they came in from English-speaking students, have been fairly identical. Whether the student came from Maine or Texas, from Canada or Australia, there were fifteen or sixteen titles that appeared with regularity on his list and four or five more that appeared on nine lists out of ten. That is, there was a body of some twenty volumes which was the property of every boy and girl who had come through high school. It might belong in the well-remembered group or in the barely remembered group, it might be on the very edge of memory, but it was certain to be there. Within the last two years, however, this condition has notably changed. In the set of lists handed in last fall, *The Merchant of Venice* was the only book holding its own on every paper, though *Silas Marner* was also still on the greater number of them. Barring these two, the former standbys were more conspicuous by their absence than by their presence. Gone was Sir Roger, gone the "Conciliation," gone a whole host of old-time favorites and bugbears, and in their places appeared a wide range of titles which had only this in common, that they were almost invariably modern.

The class happened to be a large one coming from many parts of the world; the conclusions drawn from a study of its reading

lists have since been bulwarked from other sources. Beyond question, there is just now a very especial impatience among English teachers toward standardized reading courses, a very especial revolt against the assumption that the book which is good for John must inevitably be good for Henry as well. As a result of this revolt, more widespread and more highly authorized than ever before, diversity is tending to take the place of uniformity in high-school reading.

Now it is no part of the purpose of this paper to protest against diversity in itself. When a considerable number of English departments all over the country decide either upon a change of policy or upon an informal shift of emphasis which amounts to a change of policy, it may be taken for granted that there are solid reasons behind their decision. Even that hopeless theorist, the college instructor, is now ready to admit that many a boy who, with the best will in the world toward improvement, remains blind to *Il Penseroso* will thrill to the splendid challenge of *Gloucester Moors*, and by that substitution and others to follow it be saved from adding himself to the total of wastage which is yearly charged up as part of the price of a fixed reading course. And yet, in spite of this admission, the college teacher, dealing not with the whole mass of students in any one community but with the upper 2 or 3 per cent drawn from many communities, sees in the increasing habit of individual adaptation a very real danger to what is perhaps the most important service rendered by the teaching of English literature.

Let me illustrate this danger by an extreme example, taken, as all good examples should be, from the classroom. In this same Freshmen class, which provides more wisdom than it receives, three men happened, a year or two ago, to sit side by side in the front row. One of the three was a Californian; one came from Quebec; the third, swarthy and squat and intent, wrote Tokio as his home address. The Japanese was older than the other two, more studious, fully equipped with English vocabulary. None the less, it was he whose gain from lectures and discussions was the least, and this, let me repeat, not from linguistic difficulties. His shortcoming lay deeper, not in the lack of words, but in the lack of a whole set of ready-to-use literary symbols which the other two, Californian

and Canadian alike, had brought with them from their earlier school days. If the absence of these symbols had affected only his further study of literature, it would not have been especially significant, but, as a matter of fact, its effect extended into every part of living. His mind was filled with furniture other than the mental furniture of his companions; as a consequence, they neither understood him nor he them, and opportunities for friction were innumerable; whereas Canadian and Californian, geographically far apart during their days of preparation, were, in spite of distance, mentally and emotionally close together, knew, each of them, fairly well in advance what acts were accepted and what acts were taboo according to the other's code.

The understanding and the misunderstanding alike had, of course, other causes as well as reading, and yet probably no other single cause which, taken alone, was of such importance. Into the making of any code there go things other than books, but to how large a degree in this last century the presence of a common code is the result of books read in common is appreciable only when we stop to consider the host of mental images which most of us have drawn from reading. Brutus and Cassius, Mr. Micawber, the tragic figure of Carton on the scaffold—if a man belong anywhere within the reading group, even though he himself never willingly opens a volume, these and others are as familiar to him as the fingers on his own hand. A reference to any one of them produces in his mind a picture which is at once the likeness of an individual and the symbol of a particular moral quality. Boys and girls who come early into the possession of these symbols carry about, as a result, a set of ready-made formulas, each one embodied in some familiar fictional character. By the time they reach maturity, they can hardly have avoided adopting a number of these formulas for their own. They interpret life in the terms of them. They comprehend the springs of action in people who are guided by the same formulas, and they usually do not comprehend people otherwise guided.

It is this power of comprehension between widely separated English-speaking groups, both inside and outside of the United States, that standardized reading in the high schools has very

materially aided. It is the possible weakening of this power that is threatened in its abandonment. Somewhere in the high schools today sit the potential leaders of America. Never has it been more important than now that the minds of these leaders, north and south and east and west, be held close to their common heritage. Even granting that for the individual student the gain is higher under the new conditions, granting—and it is much to grant—that the substituted books will invariably be as nutritive as those they supplant, there is yet the question whether uniformity itself has not a value too great to allow of its being sacrificed—a question worth long thought on the part of every teacher of English.